DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 580 CS 216 515

AUTHOR Calderonello, Alice; Shaller, Deborah
TITLE When Cyburgs (Cyborgs) Write.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (49th, Chicago, IL, April 1-4, 1998).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) - Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; *Language Role; Metaphors; *Scholarship; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS *Academic Discourse Communities; Authority; Faculty Attitudes; *Professional Concerns; Scholarly Writing

ABSTRACT

In an extended conversation two female writing instructors discuss the kind of discourse available in the academy, the way educators are trained to deploy its conventions, and the different ways that voices are authorized. They cite Harraway as an academic writer who bridges the various post-structuralist discourses without ever losing sight of the ways in which gender (and race and class) affect discursive practices. They also note that a cursory pass through recent issues of the scholarly journals "College English" and "College Composition and Communication" suggests that many writing colleagues have been thinking about issues concerning the kind of discourse available in the academy. Peter Elbow has said that readers and writers have competing interests over who gets control of the text. Reed Way Dasenbrock weighs in with the following statement: "The scene of interpretation is not always governed by good will, but sometimes governed by a will to power in which interpretive authority is contested rather than granted." One of the instructors longs for a language that bridges more easily her life within and without the academy but also feels that the academy has a technology that needs translating on any number of occasions, and that particularly in the realm of metadiscourse there is a need for metaphors that help to describe and to understand discursive practices that seem transgressive. (NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 424 580

WHEN CYBURGS (CYBORGS) WRITE

Alice Calderonello and Deborah Shaller

4Cs 1998

CS216515

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

A. Calderonello

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

DEB: On my way to lunch with a colleague, I was talking about something insignificant just as a way to get a conversation started, and in response to me, my colleague says, in absolutely characteristic fashion, something like, "That's just like Kirkegard, right? His ideas about interruption?" And I react as I always do: momentary confusion followed by one of a number of strategies I typically employ--perhaps an elaborate eye-roll or, if I'm lucky, the context suggests a clever reply I can draw from my private arsenal of linguistic grenades, which I lob into conversation any time I feel unable to participate politely. My colleague says "right?" as a way to assume my knowledge of his references, but in fact, I have little background in philosophy and even less desire to lunch with allusions. In either case, the conversation aborts, and we have just performed something complex and faintly disturbing: for me, my colleague's training speaks inevitably of his Ivy League education and so poses long-standing problems for me, problems that used to lead me to silence and high anxiety around him. But even as I find ways to remain sturdy and present, the texts of these encounters continue to raise issues about the kinds of discourse we have available in the academy, the way we are trained to deploy its conventions, and the different ways that voices are authorized.

ALICE: Deb, Two things leaped out at me from what you said: words like "arsenal of linguistic grenades" which you felt you had to "lob" into a conversation--to do what? Clear a space? Be heard? And on the way to lunch

for heavens sake? If one has to go to war to be "heard" at lunch, what does this suggest about the "artillery" we must "deploy" to be heard in a professional space, such as this one--or worse a professional *writing* space, such as a journal or a book? What gates have to be demolished? What armies (of reviewers, perhaps?) have to be outsmarted?

DEB: Unfortunately, I do think my metaphors suggest a kind of violence; frankly, that is part of my strategy of resistance, perhaps not so much a clean effort to resist as something that Henry Giroux distinguishes as oppositional, meaning, if I remember rightly, that the strategies merely oppose for opposition's sake and frequently without regard to what the bearer of grenades will gain; in other words, they frequently just blow up in your face. But your noticing the metaphor makes me think how important it is to create these "new" discourses, or at least to work assiduously at dismantling the old. Because in all these years of anger, I haven't really found an effective way to rewrite the space I've cleared. And I would add that the rise of cultural studies, postmodern studies, et. al, which I'm very much involved in, has made it harder to argue the gendered nature of the encounter I described.

ALICE: That's one reason that I like Harraway so much: she bridges the various post-structuralist discourses without ever losing sight of the ways in which gender (and race and class) affect discursive practices. And all of this is not unrelated to the other phrase that seemed prominent to me: You said his

reference to Kirkegard "speaks inevitably of his Ivy League education." These words raise the issue of class. And the question that comes to my mind, at least, is this: In what ways do matters such as the class, race, ethnicity, and/or gender of a writer influence her perceptions regarding what she has to do to clear a writing space for herself? How do these perceptions affect the means she chooses to establish Authority as a writer. And what are the cumulative effects on readers of these authoritative practices?

DEB: Class has everything to do with it, I'd say, wouldn't you? My own sense that mentioning Kirkegard somehow "inevitably" speaks to Ivy League education is interesting because it's so clearly wrong! The reference speaks only to a knowledge of Kirkegard. So what happens so often is that practices--like certain kinds of citations and certain occasions when they are used--contribute instantly to a perception of power, to a deep structure of understanding about how the conventions of discourse work to elevate or exclude.

ALICE: Deb, sometimes I want to think that this consideration of the minutae of authoritative practice is a kind of obsession with the trivial. But that's not the case. You and I are not alone in asking these questions. Just a cursory pass through some (fairly) recent issues of College English and College Composition and Communication (CCC) suggests that many of our colleagues have been thinking about the issues you raised concerning the kinds of discourse we have available in the academy, the way we are trained

to deploy its conventions, and the different ways that voices are authorized academic writing. In the last several years Peter Elbow has written on this topic, claiming (among other things) that "readers and writers have competing interests over who gets control of the text."(CCC, Feb. '95)" I think also that Reed Way Dasenbrock makes similar claims about struggles between readers and writers in his discussion of Derrida's responses to others' readings of his texts: "The scene of interpretation" {he says} is "not always governed by good will, but sometimes governed by a will to power in which interpretive authority is contested rather than granted." (College English, March '94) To this discussion of contest and struggle to establish authority, Richard Miller has added his article called "The Nervous System" (pun intended, I'm sure) in which he makes some pretty (for me, anyway) anxiety-producing statements like this one: "The academy, in general, is not concerned with the production of writing that matters in the sense of providing a therapeutic outlet for the author. Writing that matters in the context of the academy is writing that establishes the author's position within the filed of study, that demonstrates the author's analytical and diagnostic powers, that clearly attests to the author's ability to break new ground." Miller does offer a strategy to, perhaps, mediate this state of affairs--as he depicts it--suggesting that academic writers think of their work not just as something that gets them "seen" (establishing one's presence in the field; making oneself a visible member of the profession, bolstering one's vita, etc.) but as something they want others to hear: "[w]hat would happen if we also thought

about our work as learning how to speak and write so others could hear us? How might we do this?" (College English, March '96).

DEB: Let me just jump in here and say a couple of things. One is that you must be thinking--as you make an effort to acknowledge some of the ways our conversation has been figured elsewhere--that in some sense you've hit the inevitable discursive moment when you absolutely have to cite other people. And this makes me think that one way of restoring some kind of sanity to the process is to let go of the notion of coverage that has long dominated principles of citing. That is, just as educators are now saying that coverage is the enemy of education, we can probably offer the corollary axiom that coverage is likewise the enemy of new knowledge, which really ought to grow out of those moments of reading or listening that have real impact--and not out of the increasingly disturbing belief that ideas can be owned absolutely, can be claimed, certified, and guarded. You know how so many essays are now ringed by long, tedious footnotes that seem analogous to me to the growth of walled and gated communities--and the whole process (these lengthy footnotes after all, are often provided by grant time or grad. assistants) seems also like the extraordinary wealth--excess wealth--that follows the other kinds of economic changes inside and outside of the academy. That said, I'd also have to say that I don't understand what it means to claim that a "real" purpose of writing as "therapeutic" for the writer. I don't know that such language speaks to me very effectively.

ALICE: What about how Sheree Meyers has approached this issue? Several years ago she spoke quite persuasively about the problematics of authoritative practices, asking "Can we establish authority that is not based on an illusion of mastery? Can we locate an academic discourse that is not aggressively combative and competitive....?" (College English, January 93). One of the places that she located--and discussed--as a source of this type of discourse was the writing of Jane Gallop! So you can imagine how delighted I was that we will be echoing and validating the work that she produced before us. Still, you know that we have talked about the naming of others' work as a problematic practice--whether in footnoting, bibliographies, or that practice we couldn't quite figure out what to call because "name dropping" had unfortunate connotations.....

DEB: Yes, that's what I mean: we add yet another layer of self-consciousness to the process! Because there are people all over the place who have been making these points, or points very like these. I'd even go back to Richard Ohmann's English in America as a starting point for so much of my own thinking that I imagine he's said things like this even if he hasn't--but absolutely certain that one way or the other, he sets the stage for what follows. And Jane Tompkins, whose dissatisfaction with education--and whose willingness to talk about such things as "violence" in the academic essay, bell hooks, whose creation of a writing persona is itself a significant gesture, as

well as her writing about the need to ground and make personal--without "personalizing" (and I think this is one of the key distinctions we're going to have to work at)--also lead solidly in this direction. And if I just sit here, as I'm doing now, and name people whose work influences me, I think I give the reader or those listening a sense of my own location and how my own ideas have been constructed over time and text. But if I feel the need to cover everybody, and even to find the specific reference for Ohmann or hooks, for instance, I'm probably either going to leave them out or not write at all, probably the latter. Of course, what's bothered me most about this talk as we set it up is the very self-consciousness I referred to a moment ago: why did we feel we have to call what we're after "cyborgian"? What's gained by that particular reference? And why, given all of the possibilities, do we use Harraway? I'm really suddenly not sure. What do you think?

ALICE: This is the very type of writing moment--and I know that I experience these every time I write, and so must our students--that is supposed to be erased or smoothed over so that the reader never sees it. But to erase such moments is to present a seamless, monologic, voice--a voice that never doubts. I suppose here, today at least we can't do that. So I'll try to explain why I find Harroway helpful (and not assume that she "just" is). For me Harroway's cyborg image has been a powerful one. It reminds me that nothing manifests purity, nothing is itself only and no other thing besides. The cyborg, because it is a creature--part human part machine; part living

tissue part dead or manufactured parts, typifies this for me. Harroway also talks about authoritative practices in a way that is so precise and compelling--and here I must use her words not so much to bolster mine--but because she speaks for me here, better than I can for myself: "Cyborg writing has inherited the kind of acid consciousness of people like Derrida and others who have made it simply impossible to engage in authoritative writing as if the subject who did such a thing weren't implicated in the practice and as if the history of writing weren't the history of the differentiation of the world for us with all the sticky threads to questions of power and to whose way of life is at stake in marking up the world that way rather than some other way." (Women Writing Culture, p. 49). I also have to say (finally) that being as relentlessly practical as I am, I like the suggestions Harroway offers: using "humor as a constant critical tool"; trying to "make that which seems self-evident the most odd"; and perhaps most important--to feel obligated "having inherited what we have in terms of knowing about how meanings work, about the conventional narratives of testimony, about the conventional narratives of experience, and about what kind of person can have experiences within these language communities...to remember that you do know about these things and that while you're engaged in meaning making with others, you at least at some point in your project deliberately stutter, deliberately trip; you don't try to smooth out the trouble." (p. 61)

DEB: I think Harraway is staggeringly articulate, which contributes in large part to my enjoyment in reading her. But here's my problem: I've been asked several times about the theme of this presentation, and I find myself really reluctant to reproduce its subject for people outside of the academy: it feels obscure, inaccessible, fancy in some way I'm really self-conscious about. But you know how generally self-conscious I am, so I have this problem a lot. Still, I long for a language that bridges more easily my life within and without the academy. On the other hand, we do specialized kinds of work, and it makes sense that we'll have a technology that needs translating on any number of occasions. And particularly in the realm of metadiscourse, we are surely in need of metaphors that help us to describe and to understand discursive practices that seem transgressive. So you think of this as a tool, one of any number of available ones?

ALICE: Yes, as tool to help, for instance, in re-examining from another perspective (and to re-value) the sort of writing people like Jane Gallop have produced. For this presentation I pulled out The Daughter's Seduction looking for "usable" (perhaps "appropriatable" is a better word?) passages that might illustrate the types of cyborgian feints Harroway was advocating. I found many, but thought two examples were particularly wonderful.

In a rather lengthy discussion, Gallop discusses footnotes from Freud's Civilization and its Discontents; here's what she says: "This sentence about

the woman staying with the man 'for the sake of the children' is a real locus of trouble in Civilization and its Discontents. Right at the end of this sentence appears a disturbingly long footnote (over a page in length) which does not seem to relate directly to the sentence (pp. 99-100). The footnote discusses at length and in extended and tangential detail the deprecation of olfactory sexual stimuli and their replacement by visual sexual stimuli. The oddness of such a long footnote is only amplified by another even longer footnote on the same subject at the end of this same chapter....." (p. 26) Gallup refers later to both of these footnotes (in a continuation of this discussion) as "the two disturbing footnotes" (p. 27) but later refers to the 2nd one as "In the second of his smelly footnotes, Freud writes....." (p. 28) I think that the use of the phrase "smelly footnotes" has lots of cyborgian potential: it is humorous; it un-normalizes the whole authoritative practice of footnotes--in general--and calls attention to a sort of academic slight-of-hand (the use of a footnote to unobtrusively--and yet properly" (authoritatively?) connect "unrelated" topics in a way that can't easily be disputed or quarreled with. And it does this in way that Gallop's accompanying more "rational" discussion couldn't.

Later--and I just couldn't resist picking this one--Gallop uses a similar strategy to characterize Lacan: "Not simply a philosopher, but, artfully, a performer, he is no mere father figure out to purvey the truth of his authority; he also comes out seeking his pleasure in a relation that the phallocentric universe does not circumscribe. To designate Lacan at his most stimulating and forceful is to call him something more than just

phallocentric. He is also phallo-eccentric. Or, in more pointed language, he is a prick." (p. 36). I rest my case. But seriously, this sort of punning is absolutely forbidden in academic writing--isn't it? And calling an icon a prick! Yet she gets away with it (perhaps) because she is critiquing Lacan's practice--calling attention to the fact that it derives from within his position of privilege.

But before we get too sanguine here, I do want to remind myself and everyone else that Gallop not only "got away with it"--she also seriously increased her academic capital by the publication of the Daughter's Seduction. Her practices merely became authoritative practices that increased her "right" to command public/professional discursive space. And she may have raised the writing stakes for all of us.

DEB: And, of course, Gallop's psychoanalytic location gives her license to pun in both playful and purposeful ways. But it's wonderfully subversive to create a pun that so effectively sticks to its subject and changes the way we hear the language that we otherwise make inaudible. In a similar way, I was struck anew recently by an essay that appeared in 1988 in PMLA--Susan Leonardi's "Recipes for Reading: Summer Pasta, Lobster a la Riseholme, and Key Lime Pie." I know you know this work because you're one of the people who mentioned it to me in the first place. And your mention was one of several that came at me at once from women who were working with writing, and meaning, and all the issues of power and discursive space that we're

discussing here. So I thought at the time that something important had happened with the publication of this article, an observation that many of its subsequent readers have shared. Like changing the way we hear "footnotes," Leonardi's piece changes the way we experience beginnings of academic text. She begins, "I had planned to begin by giving you my recipe for peach upside-down cake, but it's a hundred degrees out, and advising readers to turn on their ovens, even if only for half an house (which is all the cake takes to bake), seems a bit of gratuitous nastiness. I have decided to give you instead my recipe for the only dinner besides green salad and sourdough bread that sounds good to me in such intemperate weather." It now takes a full paragraph and a half before Leonardi contextualizes these recipes in anything that looks even remotely academic, ("The remainder of this essay is an attempt to explore the nature of the act I have just performed--the giving of a recipe--which seems to me to have some interesting relationships to both reading and writing.") Meanwhile, the initial refusal to contextualize remains for me one of the most transgressive moments in contemporary academic prose--truly startling, disorienting, and wonderfully embodied in the fleshiness of time, temperature, and taste. And among the several interesting things that go on here, I like so much the almost ritualized opening ("I had planned"--I can't think how many papers I've begun this way) that leads us to expect a change in topic or rhetorical positioning, but what we get instead is another recipe. These gestures are funny, unsettling, and irrepressibly cheeky. When you get to the end of the article, the restraint in the footnoting is also

happily evident: a few sources cited from novelists, feminist theorists, and, of course, cookbook writers--all of whom inhabit the same discursive space.

ALICE: Deb, I do so like being reminded that we share discursive space with cookbook writers and novelists--with butchers and bakers and candlestick makers. Because that is our project isn't it? To dramatically and profoundly enlarge and transform the notion--and the practice--of who gets to "speak." But I don't know with any sort of precision how (or even if) any of the strategies we've been discussing might broaden our discussions, make them more inclusive. And I get worried that some of what you or I might consider the most subversive writing is the least accessible. What does that mean?

DEB: I agree; we do want to enlarge the space and we are, probably, pretty caught up in a variety of inaccessibilities. But they may not be the ones we think they are--that's one thing I keep learning in classrooms, for example; and if we continue to insist on the need to open space and the parallel need to keep issues of power and transformation at the core of our musings. . . well, we may be making some small progress. What does our audience think?